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HIGH-SCHOOL DRAMATICS

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The desire of the boy or girl to act is the normal outgrowth of the play instinct of childhood. And just as the kindergarten games develop social instincts, group-sympathy, and imagination, by taking the child out of his merely private interests, so in the adolescent period the acting of plays—the assuming of another person's clothes, manners, ideas, ambitions—is bound to widen and develop the personality of the young actor. This point has been very fully and interestingly treated in a recent *Atlantic*, in an account of the Children's Educational Theater, in New York.¹ I have often seen a boy, under the influence of dramatics, so come out of his shell and reveal unsuspected traits of character—self-confidence, command, resourcefulness, energy, unselfishness, responsibility,—that not only his teachers but his classmates as well have declared that the play was the making of him. In fact I do not hesitate to say that this one element of character development is worth all the time and effort that dramatics cost.

A less important point, but one still worthy consideration, is the drill in elocution secured not only by the chosen actors, but by all candidates for a part. The old-time "declamation" is nowadays somewhat discredited, and its place is in few schools filled by anything that stimulates clear and effective vocal expression. Drill for a play is elocution in the best sense; demanding the greatest clearness and range of voice, yet free from the hollow pretentiousness of declamation, because the speaker really has ideas to communicate to an audience who really want to hear.

Dramatics may be made to serve the further purpose of

¹ G. Minnie Herts, "The Children's Educational Theater," *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1907.

acquainting pupils with good literature. Many classical plays are entirely suitable for amateur production; and some modern ones are not without literary value. There is all the difference in the world between the study of a play in the classroom and the vivid realization requisite to its production on the stage. The actors, however crude their production, must see the play no longer as a school task, but as something full of life and meaning.

A great social benefit from a properly managed play is its effect on the general spirit of the school. It is comparable to a football game, with the added advantage that it brings into prominence students of other than physical prowess. As in football the secret of success is team play, even more so in dramatics; success demands not only the subordination of the individual to the total effect, but also involves the co-operation of managers, stage hands, electrician, prompter, ticket agents, ushers, designers of posters, and others. It is possible, and wise, to use as many as fifty or seventy-five pupils in the management, and so make the play a means of solidifying the entire student body.

Objections, however, are often raised to dramatics, on the following grounds:

First, they take a very great amount of time, and so lower the standard of scholarship. This loss is said to affect the pupils who can least afford it—the seniors, already burdened with college preparation. Unlike athletics (which are open to the same objections) rehearsal for a play is not recreative, but is practically another and a difficult lesson. This objection is a real one but the danger may be minimized by restricting a given pupil to one play a year, and by excluding from the play students whose scholarship is weak. The notion that the good actor is a poor student is seldom borne out by the facts; in nine cases out of ten brains will tell, on the stage as in the classroom. And good students find the dramatic work mentally stimulating; indeed, in my experience, the better actors are not infrequently at the end of the year found in the small group of honor students.

A second objection arises from the bitter feelings dramatics sometimes arouse; vanity, sensitiveness, jealousy, fraternity rivalry. These feelings are bound to arise whenever the play is managed by a social clique, and particularly when the cast is chosen by popular vote or by a student committee. The pupils must feel that parts are assigned on a basis of merit, preferably by competition; and that at least one of the judges is both experienced and unprejudiced. Indeed, difficulties are constantly arising, in getting up an ambitious play, that require the judgment of an older person than the students themselves. There must, then, be a teacher or a graduate of the school on the committee.

A third serious difficulty is the antagonism that sometimes arises between pupils and teachers over details of management. If the teachers hold themselves aloof and merely act as critics of the plans of the student committee, such troubles are bound to arise. There should be from the start a teacher acting with the students; by becoming a promoter of the play, instead of a censor, he can from the first steer them away from the kind of difficulty that might cause friction if it were ever allowed to arise. In the Horace Mann School, since the consolidation of the students' and teachers' committees into a single board, we have never had any hard feeling on the dramatic question. Indeed, so far has the opposite spirit prevailed that very commonly pupils disappointed at not being cast for a part offer cheerfully to help in such necessary but inconspicuous positions as prompter, property-man, or waitress at the supper given to the actors.

The first objection, then, is answered by restricting play-acting to students of sound scholarship; the others, by hearty co-operation of an experienced teacher.

What the functions of this teacher should be, as I have worked them out in a dozen years' experience, I shall try to suggest in the remaining paragraphs.

He should secure from the principal absolute freedom from interference; nothing is so disastrous as a conflict of authority. This should involve, however, the right to ask for assistance

from other teachers if needed. He should be the last court of appeal: the deciding voice regarding expense, choice of play, of actors, and all other details.

He should see that the committee of students in charge of the play really represents the student body as a whole, and not some fraternity or clique. Having secured a trustworthy committee, he should work as much as possible through them, by advice or suggestion, giving his absolute decision only when imperatively needed. He should have this committee appoint a large staff of subordinates, each with definitely assigned duties, and each responsible to one member of the committee, who may appropriately hold the titles of stage manager, business manager, and social manager.

With the committee he should hold trials of actors. Every encouragement should be held out to bring forward unsuspected talent. Competitors should read or recite anything that gives them an opportunity to get out of themselves; such as, a Beatrice Hereford monologue; a scene from "The Rivals;" a bit of dialogue from Dickens or Jane Austen. They should be warned to avoid oratory, serious poetry, or (unless trying for a dialect part) dialect. The judges should note each candidate's voice, presence, facial expression, pantomime, sense of humor, ability to make points effectively, and to sustain the character represented; and should classify the possible actors as lead, character, comedy, heavy, etc. Such a list will often point to a particular play.

The teacher in charge should assist in the choice of a play, not by insisting on any one play, or even any type of play, but by putting before the committee a list of plays suitable for them to produce. This will save the committee the great and usually fruitless labor of reading plays at the publishers, a depressing task for anyone, and one for which a students' committee is wholly unqualified.

Three kinds of plays I have found available for high-school work. For the younger pupils, before the age of self-consciousness, original dramatizations of whatever they happen to be reading, as "The Christmas Carol." This is so general a

practice in the grades that we need not discuss it further here. For pupils in the middle years, the short farce or comedy, acting from twenty minutes to an hour, easily rehearsed in two or three weeks, and played perhaps before a school club. For the senior class—or preferably for a cast picked from the whole school—a three- or five-act comedy, if possible of literary standing, and avoiding sentimentality on the one hand, and vulgarity or sophistication on the other. The following are some of the most successful plays for amateurs that I know. I have tried to specify any special difficulties in filling the cast or staging the play:

SHORT PLAYS (UNDER AN HOUR)

The Obstinate Family. Three male, three female parts, all well characterized. The best acting short comedy I know.

Barbara. By Jerome K. Jerome. Two male, three female. Girl acting title rôle should be able to work from comedy to sympathetic part. Very pretty play.

The Sleeping Car. W. D. Howells. Like others of the Howells farces—*The Mouse Trap*, *The Albany Depot*, *The Register*, *The Elevator*—this requires some ingenuity in the staging, and the plot is weak. But they all have the rare distinction of humorous dialogue, real characterization, and novel situation.

A Proposal under Difficulties. J. K. Bangs. Two male, three female. The most actable farce in his volume entitled "The Bicyclers;" wholly impossible situation and lines, but very amusing.

A Box of Monkeys. Esther B. Tiffany. Two male, three female. A rollicking farce, with an absurd take-off of Americanisms, acted out to shock an English visitor. Other farces by the same author are full of whimsicality and good acting quality; e. g., *The Way to His Pocket*.

Rosberry Shrub, Sec. Frank C. Drake. One male, three female. Two well-contrasted old-lady character parts; above the usual short play in reality and humor of characterization.

Ici On Parle Français. T. J. Williams. Three male, four female. Lively farce, if acted fast. Good extravaganza parts, especially the Englishman talking French and the Frenchman talking English. More effective if costumed about 1860.

The Revolving Wedge. Thornton M. Ware and George P. Baker. Five male, three female. Exceptionally well constructed and actable college play: the conflict between the Thanksgiving game and the Thanksgiving dinner. Characters good.

A Straw Man. Edward Aborn. Three male, two female. Garden

exterior. Effective and easy farce verging towards horse-play. A straw dummy is dressed in the clothes of one of the boys, and absurd complications follow.

Box and Cox. J. M. Morton. Two male, three female. Two costumes (could be home made). An old favorite; demands only sense of fun and quickness; must go very fast.

MEDIUM LENGTH (ONE TO TWO HOURS)

My Lord in Livery. Three male, three female. Three costumes. Very taking farce of mistaken identity; the young naval officer disguised as footman, and the heroine as waitress. These two must dance minuet, and another girl play piano.

A Pair of Spectacles. Sidney Grundy. Eight male, three female. Needs two good comedy men for Goldfinch and Uncle Gregory, the optimist with gold spectacles and the pessimist with steel, who exchange spectacles and opinions.

Sunbonnets. Marian D. Campbell. (Girls only.) Good New England character play; dialogue and situations clever. Requires big stage and thorough drill.

The Ladies of Cranford. Mary B. Horne. (Girls only.) The best parts of Cranford centering about Miss Matty. Full study of the book needed for details of local color.

LONGER PLAYS (FULL EVENING)

SHAKESPERE. Some of the comedies are well suited to schools, especially if only the important scenes are given. They should be handled not too academically or they will drag. The most available are *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The staging is expensive, on account of scenery and costumes.

GOLDSMITH. *She Stoops to Conquer.* Rather hard to stage; large cast and frequent changes of scene. Action not difficult; lines and situations so good that the play almost acts itself. A good Tony is needed, who can appear spoiled and vulgar, and still a good fellow. Mrs. Hardcastle's rage and terror must be laughable, not serious. *The Good Natured Man* is also actable, if the poorer scenes are cut.

SHERIDAN. *The Rivals.* Similar to *She Stoops to Conquer* in difficulty of staging and excellence of effect; the characters act capitally, and are not difficult. Use Jefferson's acting edition, in three acts, omitting the tiresome Julia-Faulkland scenes. These two plays I consider by far the most worth while for a school cast.

SCHILLER. *Der Neffe als Onkel* (translated under the title "*Uncle or Nephew?*") Eighteenth century French. Brisk comedy of mistaken identity; the nephew, spurred on by a clever servant, outwits the crusty uncle. Boys taking these two parts must look alike.

PINERO. *In Chancery, Dandy Dick, The Magistrate, The Amazons*, are all given in schools; they are extremely clever, novel in situation and dialogue, and brisk in action. They have, however, a touch of cynicism which young people are apt to over-act unpleasantly. They must be played lightly.

DICKENS. *The Cricket on the Hearth*. (Jefferson's version). This can be very successful if well done; it is much more difficult, though, than a comedy, as so much sentiment is involved.

SIMPSON. *A Scrap of Paper*. An old favorite with amateur clubs. The plot turns on the possession of a forgotten love letter, which may cause trouble. The leading girl has one serious scene requiring skilful acting.

DAILEY. *A Night Off*. 7-20-8. These farces are essentially the same; rollicking good fun, full of absurdity of character and situation. They are easy to act and will succeed where a comedy of more literary merit is impracticable.

BYRON. *Our Boys*. Excellent standard comedy of the semi-romantic type. Demands one boy who can make the audience first despise and then admire him.

LLOYD. *The Woman Hater*. Good comedy parts, well distinguished; situations ingeniously absurd, especially when the "woman hater" finds himself engaged to three widows at once, and in the final scene where everyone thinks everyone else insane.

I have found it useful to have half a dozen possible plays always on hand, and then select one after the competition for parts. It saves time to build up, at trifling expense, a little dramatic library of say a hundred plays.

After the selection of the play, the teacher-assistant should assume charge of rehearsals, which the cast will enjoy better if held sharply to work. He should keep in touch with all the committee members and their appointees, settle their difficulties, audit their accounts, and assure himself that each deputy will have his task done at the proper time. Throughout, he should act as general lubricator of the wheels; and especially as a warder-off of discouragement or hurt feelings. And when the performance is over, he should have the reward not merely of a company enthusiastic for the moment, but permanently strengthened in character and bound together in friendship for each other and loyalty to their school.